Several years ago, two students enrolled in my honors seminar recoiled at the constructionist readings I had assigned. “Without any truth, how can we ever be sure of anything?” they asked; “Without sound reasoning, how are we to survive; and without a firm view of moral good, what is worth doing?” Everything they believed worthwhile seemed destroyed by the seminar. So moved were they that they took their complaints to the provost: the seminar was both immoral and nihilistic in their view and should be stricken from the curriculum. Fortunately the tradition of academic freedom saved the seminar. I can fully understand the depth of their concerns, but in my view this dark night of doubt is but a transitional phase. It is not that social constructionist ideas annihilate self, truth, objectivity, science, and morality – rather, the constructionist dialogues ask us to move beyond simplistic commitments, and consider the pitfalls as well as the promises of our traditions. Most important, these dialogues open vast potentials for co-creating the future.
To appreciate the potentials before us, it is first essential to explore the ways in our taken for granted worlds have been brought into being. In daily life we take it for granted that we should be paid for our work, we must attend to our bodily needs, that rape is immoral, and so on. And we know that smoking causes cancer, that the world’s water supply is dwindling, and that the earth moves about the sun. For the constructionist, however, these assumptions are not endings – summaries of what we know to be the case – but beginnings. That is, they invite us to ask, how did we come to hold these views; why do they seem so very obvious; what do they do for us; who is silenced by such assumptions, and are there reasons to explore alternatives? The present chapter is primarily concerned with the origins of the undeniable. The focus is on the processes by which our common realities, rationalities, and moralities take shape in our lives. I single out three major contributions to reality making: the languages through which we relate, the process of daily conversation, and the institutions in which we live. This discussion will be followed by an exploration of identity construction.

The Language We Live By

Central to any ongoing relationship is the existence of a shared reality. That is, we must have at least rudimentary agreement on what exists. If you live in a world in which there are divine powers, evil spirits, and holy men, and I live in a world composed of neurons, synapses, and endorphins, we may find it difficult to go on together. Ideally, we should employ similar words on similar occasions. It is essential that we agree on what it means to “turn right at the next corner”, “meet at 7pm”, and “have a beer”. If you are a surgeon working with your team, it won’t do if your assistant responds to your demand for a scalpel by handing you a ‘stick of gum’. More formally, our relationship will require establishing an ontology, a shared understanding of “what there is”. In developing an ontology, we also lay the groundwork for establishing a rudimentary morality. That is, as we coordinate our talk and actions within various contexts, so do we establish a right way to do things. And with these standards we begin to recognise disruptions, glitches, and failures. The establishment of “the good” creates the context for its violation. At the most basic level, the disruption of “the good” functions as a threat to the accepted reality and all those patterns of action into which this reality is woven. Married couples are often jarred when they disagree on a story of the past; academics are often shunned if they disagree with the assumptions of their peers; and many have been martyred for unconventional religious convictions. “Evil” lurks in the disruption of the accepted patterns. To explore the origins of the real and the good, let us first take up the languages we live by.

Language Structure: The Nourishing Constraint

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1978)
Recall from the preceding chapter the central place of language in the constructionist movement. As reasoned, language is perhaps the central vehicle through which we negotiate agreements about the real and the good. But it is also here that we confront an interesting paradox. We inherit longstanding traditions of language. To converse with others in English, for example, requires nouns and adjectives, transitive and intransitive verbs, and so on. If you chose not to conform to any of these conventions, and just babbled away, you would communicate very little. In effect, we rely on these conventions to get along from day to day. They enable us to collaborate with others in fulfilling ways; they nurture us; they sustain our way of life. If you have ever spent time in a land in which you couldn’t communicate with the people who lived there, you can appreciate how reliant we are on having a common language.

Yet, this same set of conventions also functions as a form of prison. We are nurtured, yes, but we can scarcely step out of the tradition to speak in some other way. To appreciate these limits, consider the common use of nouns, parts of speech that designate persons, places, or things. Nouns are obviously very useful in our everyday relations; we could scarcely live very well without them. Yet, nouns are also like threshing machines. They take a field of wheat, and chop it into separate bits. In the same way, in using nouns we construct a world of separation. There is a tree, a house, a road, a man, a dog, and so on. Consider in contrast how we would understand the world if we communicated in musical melodies and harmonies. Nouns cannot create Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*, a portrayal of life in create the country side.

Let us consider, then, two prominent characteristics of the language conventions on which we must depend: metaphor and narrative.

**Metaphors: Borrowing and Building**

What, therefore, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors ... Friedrich Nietzsche, *On truth and falsity in their extramoral sense*

Where reality counts metaphors have a bad reputation. Why? Because we traditionally define metaphors in terms of their contrast with “literal” words. Literal language is accepted as “true to fact”, “not exaggerated”, while metaphors are considered mere packaging or pretty words. As George Eliot once said, “We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them”. Yet, as the preceding pages make clear, this traditional distinction is flawed. Words do not map the world; there are no words that are in themselves better matches to the world than any others. As we found, words gain the sense of being true to fact through long-term usage within a community. What then is a metaphor? We usually have the sense of a word being a metaphor when we take it out of one context of usage and place it within another. The world is *his oyster*; life is a *bowl of cherries*. The difference between literal and metaphoric words, then, is *essentially the difference between the conventional and novel use of the word*. All our descriptions can be viewed as metaphoric if we were to trace them to their origins. For example, we identify ourselves with names – which we take to be literal and precise. I am Ken, you are Sally,
and you are Harry. Yet we were not always so – the names are all borrowed words, once literal descriptions of other persons, ripped out of context and deposited on our beings. In a sense, then, we are all metaphors of other people.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson entitled their classic work, *Metaphors we live by* (1980). In this way they point to the way in which the common words by which we understand our worlds are typically appropriated from other contexts. Because these words also make up our forms of life, tracing their metaphoric roots becomes an exciting challenge. It is when we free ourselves from the sense of the literal – words as maps – that we are free to consider other options. Consider: disagreements between people are typically the grounds for argument. However, as most of us find, arguments can often be unpleasant. Voices are raised, insults are exchanged, and instead of resolution there is animosity. These outcomes may be traced to a network of metaphors that define what an argument is. Specifically, as Lakoff and Johnson propose, arguments are equated metaphorically with war. Consider our common ways of talking:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *attacked* every weak point in the argument.
Her criticisms were *right on target*.
He *demolished* her case.
I’ve never *won* an argument with her.
He *shot down* all my arguments.

By equating argument with war in this way, we enter as combatants – it is either win or lose, destroy or be destroyed. But when we realize the metaphor of argument as war, we may wish to think of other ways of going on. What if we looked at arguments, for example, as a game? Perhaps we could then exchange positions from time to time, with each of us taking the side of the other. Would we not come to a much better understanding between us? Consider as well what we call the war on drugs, war on poverty, or the war on terrorism. If we changed the metaphors, would there be other and possibly better options available?

Metaphors dominate the scientific sphere. Consider, for example, the use of metaphor in the mental health professions, and particularly in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. To put it simply, Freud proposed that we are born with strong erotic desires; at an early age, for example, young boys wish to possess their mothers sexually. However, because these and related desires are unacceptable – subject to severe punishment – the child *represses* them. In effect, the desires are forced out of the realm of consciousness. Individuals then erect neurotic defences – compulsions, self-defeating actions, etc. – to ensure they are never released. We thus live with many neurotic defences, unable to gain consciousness of our true desires. On this view, therapy is an attempt to unearth the unconscious, to reveal the desires, and to help the person gain conscious control over them. For the psychoanalyst, hints of unconscious process can be obtained through dream analysis, slips of the tongue, and peculiar word associations. In effect, psychoanalytic practice derives from this particular conception of the mind.

Perhaps you sense the metaphoric elements in the psychoanalytic view. One of the most prominent metaphors, as Donald Spence (1987) describes it, is the *archeological*.

**AN INVITATION TO SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION**
The archeologist is one who studies the distant past, and because these early events can never be known directly, makes use of various artifacts (shards of pottery, bones, stone formations) to interpret what must have been. Often this means digging through layers of earth deposits to locate evidence of past lives. This metaphor dominates the Freudian approach – with its emphasis on the hidden and unavailable dimensions of the unconscious, the early formation of repression, the use of small bits of evidence to draw inferences regarding the unknown. The psychoanalyst serves as the archeologist, whose professional success rests on revealing “new knowledge”. This metaphor continues to dominate much therapeutic practice, in which therapists “probe” the client’s mine, to “get to the bottom” of the problem.

Yet, as Spence proposes, to see the archeological metaphor more clearly does not reduce the theory and practice to triviality (as in saying ‘Well, it’s only a metaphor’). “Because metaphors are central aspects of our understanding we will always continue to use them; by the same token, we should not be used by them” (1987, p. 7). For Spence, as a practicing psychiatrist, to be used by the metaphor is to mistake it for the real, and thus to reduce clinical sensitivity and imagination. It is to “reduce our options to only one” (ibid, p. 8). To use metaphors is also to take advantage of their capacity to organize elements in new ways. Different forms of research were set in motion by viewing light in terms of waves as opposed to particles. By viewing DNA molecules as structured like a double helix, many research findings could be brought together in a new and productive way.

All very well about scientific theory, you may say, but what about my “experience”, and “emotion?” Aren’t they real, something beyond metaphor? In answer, recall that the constructionist does not pronounce on what is really real. Rather, it is in singling out something as real that we are engaging in a social process of constructing. In this sense, we can ask about the metaphors that are implicit in what we understand as our “private experience”. If closely examined, we find that the idea of private experience relies on a central metaphor of the person in Western culture, one that defines the mind as a form of mirror, with the world “out there”, and its contents reflected by experience “in here”. You can begin to realize that the idea of experience as an “in here” is a metaphor when you stop to locate what precisely is in versus out. Where does the outside stop and the inside begin, on the skin or the surface of the retina, in the receptor nerves, or perhaps the cortex? Consider: if you removed everything we consider “outside” from experience (for example, everything “in the physical world”), would there by anything left over we could identify as experience; and if you removed everything we call inside, would there be any “objects of experience” still remaining? When we try to tease apart what is inner versus outer, we enter a thicket of ambiguity. As scholars point out, history has also deposited on our doorstep competing metaphors of “the nature of experience”. In terms of the mirror metaphor, experience is passive – simply reflecting the passing world. However, there is also the metaphor of experience as a searchlight, actively searching and illuminating the world in order to see achieve certain ends (Bruner & Feldman, 1990). In/out, active/passive – all are borrowed ideas that construct our sense of experience.

The way we understand our emotions also owes a debt to metaphor. There are several basic metaphors that guide much of what we can say about our emotions.
Because we believe that emotions represent the animal in us, we can say, “he bellowed in anger”, or “her feathers were ruffled”. However, because the animal metaphor is prominent we cannot easily say, “his anger was robotic”. We inherit a metaphor of emotions as driving forces, and thus we can say, “He was driven by fear”, or “love makes the world go round”. We would be talking nonsense if we said, “He was so joyous that he nodded off to sleep”. There is also a prevalent metaphor of emotion as biological, which enables us to say “I have a gut feeling”, or “his heart broke from grief”. To a lesser degree we also have a tradition of emotions as a disease of the mind. Thus, we say, “he was blind with envy”, or “she fell madly in love”, but not, “his rage is a sign of his maturity”. One might say that when we “speak our minds” we enter the world of poetry.

The Question of Sex

As constructionists propose, the ways we understand the world are often constrained and controlled by the structure of language. As you will recall from the preceding chapter, one of the major features of language is its dependence on binaries. The meaning of any word depends on its contrast with other words. Thus, we contrast black and white, up and down, in and out, good and evil, and so on. Why is this sexy? Consider the following binaries: man/woman, and hetero/homosexual. In Western culture we generally presume there are two genders – men and women – and two directions of attraction – toward opposite or to the same sex. And, cultural tradition generally places the greater value on men, and most certainly on heterosexuality. But, from the constructionist standpoint these distinctions are not required by the way things are; we could make other distinctions, or depending on our interests, none at all. And the values could be reversed. Yet, it is difficult to “think outside the box” in this case, because the binaries have come to serve as “the real”.

If this proposal seems radical, consider the following: how do you know that someone is a male or female? You might say by virtue of differences in genitalia. However, small children make gender distinctions without knowledge of genital differences. And, for biologists, it is not the genitalia that count but the chromosomes. Thus, a “female” Olympic star may be disqualified because “her” chromosomes indicate that she is a male. Further, there are many people who feel they have been born in the wrong body; often they seek surgery to restore themselves to their real gender. Who is to serve as the authority in such matters? And could there be alternatives, for example, a unisex?

Much the same argument hold for sexual preference. What counts as an objective indicator of sexual preference? If women like to spend more time with their women friends, is this an indication of sexual preference? When young boys play with each others’ genitals, is this homosexuality? When teenage girls practise kissing with each other, are they lesbians? If one has a sexual experience with someone “of the opposite sex” and doesn’t like it, does this indicate homosexuality? And if one periodically enjoys sex with someone of the “same sex”, does this mean they are basically homosexual? As
well, how do we classify those who prefer to masturbate than have intercourse, or those who become monastic and abandon sexuality altogether? Again, who is to serve as the final authority on what constitutes sexual preference? Can we also generate alternatives to an either/or orientation? We might avoid much misery by doing so.

Narrative: Reality as Story

I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’

Alasdair MacIntyre, Beyond virtue

Imagine yourself a witness to a crime, and placed on the witness stand. You are asked to describe what happened on the night of 6 June? You reply, “blue … four … shoe … I … hair” and then go silent. You are questioned again, “No, no no … listen carefully … tell me clearly what really happened”. You repeat yourself, and do so again as the lawyer grows increasingly exasperated. Finally, the judge bellows, “I hold you in contempt of court!” Based on earlier chapters, the judge’s actions would seem unjustified. After all, you know that whatever happened on that night doesn’t demand or require any particular formation of syllables; words aren’t pictures. However, within the Western tradition of “reporting what happened”, the judge is perfectly justified. Within this tradition one is required to tell a proper story. One is required to treat reality as a story.

What does telling a proper story mean by Western standards? In the more formal terms, this is to ask about the standards for narrative construction. What, by Western standards, are the conventions or rules for constructing an acceptable narrative? There appear to be at least five significant features of what we commonly take to be well-formed narratives. A narrative may be acceptable without meeting all five criteria, but as the ideal is approximated the narrative will ironically seem more “true to life”. Among the most prominent criteria for a well-formed narrative by traditional standards are the following.

A valued end point
An acceptable story must first establish a goal, an event to be explained, a state to be reached or avoided, or more informally, a “point”. This point is typically saturated with value; it is understood to be desirable or undesirable. For example, your criminal testimony should be built around the single point: the occurrence of a crime. How did this awful event occur? If you answered the question of what happened on the evening in question in terms of how you tied your shoe, again you would be chastised. The event has no value in this context.

Events relevant to the end point
Once an endpoint has been established it more or less dictates the kinds of events that can figure in the story. Specifically, an intelligible narrative is one in which events serve to make the goal more or less probable, accessible, or vivid. Thus, if the
point of the story is “the crime”, you are expected to tell of events that are relevant to this point. If you said, “I tied my shoe, the dog barked, the light was on, John lay dead on the floor, and my tooth ached”, you would still fail as a witness. The “truth and nothing but the truth” is not what is wanted, but a proper story. This means relating events that had specifically to do with John’s death. This is to say that “the dog barked” could figure in the account, but connectives would be necessary, such as, “The dog barked at the man I saw jump from John’s window”.

**Ordering of events**

Once a goal has been established and relevant events selected, the events are usually placed in an ordered arrangement. The most widely used convention of ordering is that of linear time. In an intelligible story, one understands the events as unfolding in clock time. Thus you would fail as a witness once again if you said, “The man jumped from the window; a scream occurred, John lay dead on the floor, a shot rang out”.

**Causal linkages**

The ideal narrative provides a sense of explanation. As it is said, “The king died and then the queen died”, is only a listing of events. But to say, “The king died and then the queen died of grief” is the beginning of a tale. As narrative theorist Paul Ricoeur puts it, “Explanation must … be woven into the narrative tissue” (1981, p. 278). Thus, you would receive high marks as a witness if you could tell a tale of John and Harry’s argument, causing Harry to become angry and pull out a pistol, which caused John to scream at him, at which point Harry pulled the trigger, which sent John sprawling to the floor, the sight of which caused Harry to leap from the window. Each event is causally related to the preceding in a seamless tale.

To illustrate the importance of these criteria of good narration, researchers asked participants to either tell a story of an actual occurrence in their lives, or to make up an occurrence (Bennett & Feldman, 1981). When a group of evaluators were asked to distinguish between stories they suspected to be true as opposed to false, the results were interesting. Stories that seemed more genuine to the evaluators were those that more closely approximated the well-formed narrative as outlined here. Particularly important to the “sense of truth” was evidence of a valued endpoint and causal linkages among events. In telling the truth, life should copy art.

To appreciate the significance of narrative in daily life, consider the way in which you understand your own life. First, consider the way we understand our momentary daily lives in terms of “ups” and “downs”, progress and setbacks, fulfillment and frustration. To see life in these ways is to participate in a storied world. To be “up”, to progress, or to be fulfilled is to participate in a story. Similarly I understand my writing at this moment not as an isolated act, but as coming from somewhere in the past and leading to something I value in the future. Or as one commentator has put it, “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (Hardy, 1968, p. 123). The same may be said about the way others respond to us – at least our long-term acquaintances. They typically treat us as characters in a story, with
issues of good and evil, success and failure, “ups” and “downs” prominent in the way they relate to us.

To gain a better grasp of the way in which narratives fashion our sense of identity, it is useful to consider major forms of narrative convention. Such forms can be understood best by returning again to the first essential ingredient of the good story, the valued endpoint. To make sense of our lives, we typically posit some kind of endpoint or goal (“how I came to be X”, “achieve Y”, or “believe in Z”). Given the endpoint, try to envision a two-dimensional space in which all events are arrayed over time in terms of whether they move toward or away from the valued goal. To illustrate, consider two rudimentary narrative forms: the *progressive narrative*, in which the endpoint is positive (a success, victory, etc.), and the story is all about the events that lead up to achieving this valued state; and a *regressive narrative*, in which the endpoint is negative (a failure, loss, etc.), and the story tells about continuous decline. Although few of our stories about ourselves are pure examples of progressive and regressive narratives, they often approximate these cases. “How I won the match … came to this conclusion … achieved these results” and so on in the former case, and in the latter, “How my romance failed … I was cheated … or ended up on drugs”.

Fortunately these are not the only story forms available to us. Other popular variants of these more rudimentary forms include the *happily-ever-after narrative* (“How after many difficult years, I finally ended up in a profession that is rewarding”), and a narrative that is often very attractive to males, the *heroic saga narrative*. In this case one understands one’s life as a series of ups and downs – a struggle, perhaps, to
achieve a goal, misfortune sets in, I struggle again toward victory, but again set-backs occur, until finally I win out. Two other popular narratives deserve mention. The first is the tragedy, in which someone in high position or at the point of success, falls rapidly into despair or failure. If my computer crashes and takes my manuscript copy with it, and I shout a curse, I am giving expression to a tragic narrative – at the peak of production I am brought low. Finally, almost all prime-time television dramas take the form of what might be called a comedy–romance. In this case a positive state of affairs is interrupted by a calamity (for example, a crime, an error of judgment, a faux pas), and the remainder of the story is occupied with a series of events that finally restore order and tranquility. Perhaps you are one of those many people who understand their daily lives in this way – constructing your world so that you begin strong in the morning, run into problems, snags, and glitches during the day, and then attempt to “dig out” so that by bedtime the day has come to a happy conclusion. Life approximates television.

Narrative Truth in Psychoanalysis

One of the most exciting application of these ideas was invited by Donald Spence’s groundbreaking book *Narrative truth and historical truth* (1982). Most psychoanalysts attempt to locate the origin of people’s problems. If someone has uncontrollable fear, for example, it is natural for the analyst to ask why. Relief from distress, it is reasoned, requires that one grasp and overcome the source of the problem. But how is one ever to accurately grasp the past? There are many problems in getting at historical truth: the fuzzy recollections of the patient, the incapacity of the verbal report of the patient to match available images of the past, and the necessity for selecting events that will have meaning in the therapeutic relationship. But how can one be sure what events will have meaning? Here the therapist helps, typically by asking leading questions – for example, about the patient’s relationship to his or her mother and father. In answering the questions, the analyst directs attention to certain things and not others. In effect, the analyst begins to help the patient create the past in a certain way. Most importantly, Spence reasoned, the analyst is guided by a theory of cause and cure. The theory presumes a regressive narrative – “I was fine, until some event brought me down” – and as well, that analysis will constitute a progressive
narrative. The problem will be overcome. In effect, there is no free reporting of the past; the therapist and the patient work together to generate a narrative that will inevitably support the presumptions of psychoanalytic theory. This narrative truth then serves not only as the key to cure but for the patient, it becomes “my life”. As Spence concludes, “The construction not only shapes the past – it becomes the past” (ibid, p. 175).

Rhetoric and Reality

Rhetoric is the art of speaking well – with knowledge, skill and elegance.

Cicero, De Oratore

Interest in the ways language shapes our sense of the real soon brings us to the doorstep of an ancient tradition of study. The study of rhetoric dates to classical Greek civilization when rhetoric was an essential element in the education of promising young men. For centuries afterwards, the works of Aristotle, Cicero, and others were used to fashion skills in public speaking.Crudely put, rhetoric is the art of persuasion. In a more refined sense it is the art of using words in a way that invites others to participate in the worlds they create. Yet, with the growing influence of modernist, beliefs in objectivity, science, and truth, rhetoric suffered the same fate as the concept of metaphor. To convince others by virtue of “pretty talk”, cleverness, emotional appeals, and the like was illegitimate. For the modernist logic and factual evidence – expressed clearly and plainly – were the keys to progress.

In recent years the study of rhetoric – like metaphor – has undergone a renaissance. This rekindling of interest grows directly from the soil of social constructionism. Of particular interest, how can rhetorical study help us to understand the difference between effective and ineffective constructions. Or, to put it another way, if rhetoric is the art of persuasion, then the study of rhetoric can help us understand what kind of language convinces us that something is real. If we can appreciate how we are convinced, we are also freed from rhetoric’s effects. Of course, in many situations we are already sensitized to the power of rhetoric. Not that we always resist, but we do understand advertisements, sales pitches, and political speeches in terms of rhetoric. More dangerous are communications that only “report the facts” – the world as it is, outside anyone’s particular perspective. In these cases rhetorical analysis is especially useful. It attempts to question the authority of science, policy making, military decision making, economics. Too often, a resort to the facts functions to silence other voices. Too often, the language of objective reality is used as a means of generating hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion. This is so not only in science, where one of the chief aims of the scientist is to lift his or her own particular constructions into the status of “accepted fact” (Latour & Woolgar, 1979) but it is also the case more generally, where those who don’t speak the rhetoric are scorned as “unrealistic”, “deluded”, “irrational”, or “self-deceived”. To illuminate these rhetorical manoeuvres is thus to challenge the conventions and thereby open a space for all to speak.
How is it that our discourse succeeds in generating the sense of the “really real” – the taken-for-granted world of atoms, chemical elements, neurons, cognitions, economic processes, social structure and the like? Although much has been written on this question (see, for example, Potter, 1996), central to the power of words to create “the real” is the widely shared image or construction of the person. More specifically, the rhetoric derives from the now familiar metaphor that is of the “mind as mirror”, the belief in the mind is inside the head (subjective) and the world is outside (objective). Based on this metaphor, we hold that a person is objective when private experience is a perfect reflection of the natural world. One is objective when he/she “sees things for what they are”, “is in touch with reality”, or “takes a good look at things”. As you will recall from the above discussion, it is very difficult to separate out what is “in the mirror” as opposed to “in the world”. Thus, we find that objectivity cannot refer to a relationship between mind and world; rather, as the rhetorical scholar proposes, objectivity is achieved by speaking (or writing) in particular ways. Let’s consider two significant ways in which rhetoric creates the real.

**Distancing the object: the world “out there”**

Because reality talk is supposed to be about a “world out there”, it is important that the speaker employs distancing devices, that is, discursive means of ensuring that the object in question is not “in the mind” but exists at a distance. At the simplest level, words such as the, that, or those, call attention away from the observer and place the object(s) at a seeming distance. Distancing may be contrasted with personalization, terms calling attention to the object as a private possession of the mind. “My view”, “my perception”, “my sense of” are all personalizing. Thus, the scientist is likely to speak of “the apparatus”, as opposed, for example, to “my sense of an apparatus”, “the experimental chamber” as opposed to “my impression of an experimental chamber”, or “those questionnaires”, and not “my image of questionnaires”. The former phrases create the real, while the latter create suspicion.

The distancing of object from observer can also be achieved through the use of metaphors. Consider, for example, the metaphor of the hidden continent, a land out there to be explored. In science one thus finds such phrases as “Smith first discovered the effect”, “Jones found that …”, “Brown detected that …”, and so on. Terms such as “unearthed” and “brought to light” are similarly used, suggesting a companionate metaphor of buried treasure. Consider the unfortunate consequences of some personalized contrasts: “Smith first felt is was so”, “Jones also shared this fantasy”, and “Brown loved this image of the world”.

**Purifying the lens: the death of passion**

The so-called “mirror of the mind” achieves objectivity when there is no interference, when it possesses no defect that might “distort”, or “bias” the image produced by the world. One means of demonstrating that there are no “mirror effects” is to use phrases granting the world an active power to create the image (as opposed to characteristics of the mirror itself). Thus, such phrases as “the data tell us”, or “The results are clear”, contribute to the sense of the real. On the other hand, it is important to demonstrate the absence of internal states – such as
the emotions, motives, values, and desires – in creating the reflection. One can say, “We recorded a mean of 5.65 . . .”, “It was observed that the subjects were ill at ease . . .”, or “The results demonstrated . . .” without generating doubt. However, should affective states be inserted into the same phrases, the effects would be off-putting. Consider: “My heart was set on finding a mean of over 5.00 and I was overjoyed when I got it . . .”, “Given that the research would not be published if we didn’t get positive results, we looked for evidence that would support our hypothesis. It was great that it did so . . .”, or “I fell in love with this research subject and it is thus a pleasure to share her insights”.

This purging of the mirror has an interesting side-effect on social science writing. Although such writing should be fascinating – as it attempts to “explore the depths” of human existence – it is typically dull, flat and antiseptic. One reason for this tendency is that emotional or colourful descriptions suggest biases in the mind’s mirror. In contrast, passionless technical description suggests a neutral – and thus objective – standpoint. We learn, for example, that the research subjects were college males, or women aged 40–60, or elementary school children from the inner city. In contrast, there is no mention of such matters as sexual attractiveness, off-putting obesity, creative clothing styles, charming manners, stupefying ignorance, repulsive pimples, great hair styles, and so on. To write about such matters would destroy the sense of objectivity.

To demonstrate that objectivity is not a state of mind but of rhetoric allows us to pause, and ask, “who is this writing for; what purposes does it serve and for whom?” However, this is not to argue for abandoning the rhetoric of reality. Rather, the rhetoric of reality plays a very important role within communities. This rhetoric is
often vital in achieving trust and achieving ends valuable to the community. For example, when space scientists use this rhetoric they ask their colleagues to trust that they are using the language in the same way and for the same purposes as the remainder of the community. They are “calling a spade a spade” in terms of the community’s standards, and as a result, humans can walk on the moon. The same holds for doctors, military strategists and economic planners; and without such rhetoric there would be nothing we could call “truth” in courtroom testimony. The rhetoric of the real may be essential to effective community functioning; problems result primarily when the community’s realities are treated as universal or “really real”. Let us turn now to a second major source of reality making.

Everyday Relations: The Power of the Unremarkable

I just talked with my daughter on the phone, and we talked about many things – a family dinner, summer vacation, her need for a new coat, car troubles, and so on. Nothing extraordinary here, simply everyday life. But in these few minutes we did far more than chat about the events of the day. We sustained a stable world of facts – dinners, vacations, coats, cars – and as well, affirmed the significance of our relationship. Our verbal constructions are glued to our life circumstances. We not only construct together, but we live out the implications of these constructions. The groundbreaking work on reality making in daily conversation was that of sociologist Harold Garfinkel. In his signal volume, Studies in ethnomethodology, Garfinkel (1967) focused on the ways in which people work together to achieve a sense of order and understanding. Specifically, proposed Garfinkel, our interchanges are deeply reliant on ethnomethods – practices of talking and acting – that we use to achieve a rational or taken-for-granted order. Ethnomethods may be as simple as nodding one’s head in agreement, not raising questions, or laughing at another’s joke. They inject into everyday life the sense of a common, understandable, and reliable world.

Consistent with earlier discussions, Garfinkel points out that we treat words as if they were pictures of the objects to which they refer. On the contrary, he proposes, we are always borrowing words and phrases from other contexts and simply “making do” with them in our present circumstances. For example, we treat a word like “car” as if it refers a specific object. Yet, we use the word to talk about large, gas guzzling vehicles; two-door vehicles; and tiny three-wheel vehicles. The word doesn’t picture any of them exactly; we just make do with an inexact word and trust others to credit us with making sense. In Garfinkel’s terms, we use words indexically, that is, to point or name for all practical purposes. In effect, our “natural”, taken-for-granted world only remains so because we don’t raise too many questions. When we don’t ask too many questions, and agree to be imprecise, life goes on harmoniously. To illustrate, as a class exercise Garfinkel enlisted his students to break the unspoken rules of everyday life and report on the consequences. Specifically, they were to question the conventions we use to generate “common sense”. Here is the account of a student’s report on his interchange with a member (A) of his car pool who is telling him (B) about a flat tyre of the previous day:
A: I had a flat tire.
B: What do you mean, you “had a flat tire?”

In a second case, an acquaintance (A) of the student (B), waved his hand and said:

A: How are you?
B: How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my …?
A: [Red in the face and out of control] Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don’t give a damn how you are. (p. 112)

Another student questioned his fiancée for approximately a minute and a half on the precise meaning of what she was saying. She then began to reject the questions, and finally became nervous and jittery, her face and hand movements uncontrolled. “She appeared bewildered and complained that I was making her nervous and demanded that I ‘Stop it’ … She picked up a magazine and covered her face … When asked why she was looking at the magazine she closed her mouth and refused any further talk” (1967, p. 42). As these vignettes suggest, if we challenge the taken-for-granted ways of indexing our world – even momentarily – the social fabric quickly unravels.

Now consider the issue of individual identity. We treat each other as “the same person” from day to day, even when your actions are never the same. We have an identity for practical purposes. To be sure we do create reliable worlds in this way. At the same time, however, these worlds can also be confining. There may be no escaping the self I have become. To illustrate, consider Paul Willis’ (1977) analysis of how British adolescents come into their identity as working class. As Willis proposes, it is all too easy to look at economic betterment as a natural drive: everyone wants to make more money. And with this assumption in place it is typical to see the working class as oppressed, as people who have no choice but to remain in the lower economic ranks of society. However, through extensive field work in schools and the workplace, Willis challenges these common beliefs. As he finds, working class boys join together to construct a world in which they are different from and better than the upper classes. Here, for example, they define their school teachers:

Joey: They’re bigger than us, they stand for a bigger establishment than we do … and [we] try to get [our] own back.

Eddie: The teachers think they’re high and mighty ‘cos they’re teachers, but they’re nobody really.

(Willis, 1977, p. 11)
These dispositions also permeate the boys’ classroom behaviour. Willis describes:

As the ‘lads’ enter the classroom or assembly, there are conspiratorial nods to each other … [they] specialize in a caged resentment which always stops just short of outright confrontation … During class a mouthed imaginary dialogue counterpoints the formal instruction: ‘No, I don’t understand, you c…’; ‘What you on about, twit?’; ‘Not f…… likely …’ At the vaguest sexual double meaning giggles and ‘whoas’ come from the back … If the secret of the conspiracy is challenged, there are V signs behind the teacher’s back, the gunfire of cracked knuckles from the side, and evasive innocence at the front. Attention is focused on ties, rings, shoes, fingers … anything rather than the teacher’s eyes. (ibid., p. 12–13).

This ontology of “us” versus “them” is also supported by implicit ethics: “we and our way of life our way of life are superior”. It is a matter of pride to stick with the group:

Joey: … when you’re dossing on your own, it’s no good, but when you’re dossing with your mates, then you’re all together, you’re having a laff and it’s a doss …

Fred: We’re as thick as thieves, that’s what they say, stick together.

(ibid., p. 23–24)

The value placed on their way of life is revealed in the boys’ characterizations of students who act in all the socially approved ways. These “ear’oles”, as they were called (the ear being a symbol of someone who just passively listens) are the subject of continuous scorn. Consider:

Derek: [The ear’oles] are prats like, one got on his report he’s got five As and one B …

Spanksy: I mean, what will they remember of their school life? What will they have to look back on? Sitting in a classroom, sweating their bollocks off, you know, while we’ve been … I mean look at the things we can look back on, fighting on the Pakis, fightin on the JAs [Jamaicans]. Some of the things we’ve done on teachers, it’ll be a laff when we look back on it.

Joey: [The ear’oles] are still f…… childish, the way they talk, the way they act like … they’ve got it all to come. I mean look at Tom Bradley, have you ever noticed him? I’ve always looked at him and I’ve thought, well … we’ve been through all life’s pleasures and all its f…… displeasures, we’ve been drinking, we’ve been fightin, we’ve known frustration, sex, f……, hatred, love and all this lark, yet he’s known none of it. He’s never been with a woman, he’s never been in a pub.

(ibid., p. 15–16)

It is in just such conversations as these that “the lads” help to create a world of differences, a world populated by different groups and individuals, and each laden with moral value. One must ask in this case – and perhaps all – whether these realities may not be imprisoning.
Constructing the Body

Critics often point out that the world exists prior to our constructing it. Constructionists agree that, "something exists". However, once we go about trying to describe this something, we can do little else than fall back on traditions of construction. And these traditions are many. Consider the human body, for example. Something exists, but what is it? For example, Plato believed the body was a tomb, Paul the Disciple that it is a temple of the Holy Spirit, Descartes that it is a machine, and the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre that it is the self. For contemporary marketers, the body – especially the woman’s – is a vehicle for advertising. And for many young people today, the body is used as a cultural signal to one’s identity. Both tattoos and body piercing are signs that others can read about "the kind of person I am". These differences in construction can be very important. In medicine, for example, the doctor may approach the patient’s body as simply "an object to be repaired". From the patient’s point of view, he or she is effectively reduced to a piece of meat. The result of this difference may be an insensitivity on the doctor’s part to the full and important life situation of the patient. And if mistakes are made in treatment, the chances of a lawsuit are increased. Advanced forms of medical training attempt to help doctors take account of the multiple realities of the body.

Institutional Realities: Foucault on Power

Madness exists only within a society.

Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization

Language structure and use are essential to the creation of our sense of the real and the good. However, our traditions of speech are often embedded in larger organizations. Such organizations come to have authority over matters of reality, reason, and right. Courts of law have authority over what is right or wrong in terms of the law; branches of science claim authority over what is true or false about their areas of study; religions serve as authorities on matters of the spirit; we rely on medical practitioners to be the authorities on matters of health, and so on. In effect, institutions such as these are enormously important in determining the constructions by which we live. It is for this reason that many view these institutions as centres of power. In these terms, a constructionist sensibility alerts us to issues of freedom and control.

Just such issues feature centrally in the works of one of the most catalytic social theorists of the past century, Michel Foucault. In the present context his concern is with the way in which people quite willingly subjugate themselves to subtle forms of power. (see especially, Foucault, 1978; 1979) We are not speaking here of the obvious forms of power – control by law and arms – but rather, the insinuation of
power into ordinary life. For the most part we live quite ordered lives; with few misgivings, we attend school, enter professions, pay for our purchases, go to doctors, and so on. For Foucault, in the very exercise of these taken-for-granted practices, we demonstrate our subjugation to power. For Foucault, “power is ... an open, more or less coordinated ... cluster of relations” (in Gordon, 1980, p. 199).

Language is a critical feature of such power relations, and in particular the discourse of knowledge. Foucault was centrally concerned with subjugation by various groups who claim “to know”, or to be in possession of “the truth” – especially about who we are as human selves. Consider, for example, the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, education, and the like. These disciplinary regimes, as Foucault called them, generate languages of description and explanation – classifications of selves as healthy or unhealthy, normal or abnormal, upper or lower class, intelligent or unintelligent – along with explanations as to why they are so. The regimes also employ various research procedures, whereby we are scrutinized and classified in their terms. In effect, when we offer ourselves for examinations of various sorts – from medical examinations to college board assessments – we are giving ourselves over to the disciplinary regimes, to be labelled and explained in their terms. And when we carry these terminologies into our daily lives, speaking to others of our cholesterol level, our depression, or academic grades, we are engaging in power relations – in one way or another extending the control of the disciplinary regimes. As our disciplines of study begin to influence public policy and practices, we become further ordered in their terms. Ultimately we participate in our own subjugation.

To appreciate Foucault’s argument consider an ordinary case: one day you are feeling down, a little blue, perhaps self-critical and a friend asks “what’s wrong ...?” Chances are you might respond, “Oh, I’m just a little depressed”. Although describing yourself as “depressed” is wholly unremarkable in today’s culture, it was not always so. The first classification of mental disorders in the United States, occurring in 1840, contained only a handful of distinctions and was closely tied to organic dysfunction. In those days the term “depression” did not exist. It was only in the 1930s, with the emergence of psychiatry and clinical psychology, that “mental disorders” began to mushroom. By 1938, some 40 disturbances were recognized (including moral deficiency, misanthropy, and masturbation). Since that time the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the official handbook for diagnosis, has gone through four editions, and the number of deficit terms has now mounted to over 300 (which include such disorders as inhibition of orgasm, gambling, academic deficiency, bereavement, and negative attitudes toward medical treatment). Depression is not only a significant entry in the present manual, but there are several sub-types as well (for example, chronic, melancholic, bipolar). Mental health professionals now believe that more than 10% of the population suffers from depression. Anti-depressant drugs, virtually unknown a quarter of a century ago, are now a multi-billion dollar industry. And if you find yourself “feeling kind of blue” you may well expect to find yourself on medication.

Interestingly, this dramatic expansion of identified disorders roughly parallels the growing numbers of mental health professionals. For example, at the turn of the century the American Psychiatric Association numbered less than 400; today there are over 40,000 members – a hundred-fold increase. The costs of mental health
have increased in similar magnitude. By 1980 mental illness was the third most expensive category of health disorder in the United States. In effect, we find ourselves facing what appears to be a cycle of progressive infirmity. Consider the phases: (1) as mental health professionals declare the truth of a discourse of dysfunction, and (2) as this truth is disseminated through education, public policy, and the media, so do we (3) come to understand ourselves in these terms. (‘I’m depressed’.) With such understandings in place, we will (4) seek out mental health professionals for cure. As cure is sought, (5) so is the need for mental health professionals expanded. And (6), as the professional ranks expand, so does the vocabulary of mental disorder prosper. The cycle is continuous and ever-expanding in its effects (for further elaboration see Gergen, 2006).

Is there a limit to the dysfunctional disciplining of the population? I recently received an announcement for a conference on the latest research and cure for addiction, called, “the number one health and social problem facing our country today”. Among the addictions to be discussed were exercise, religion, eating, work, and sex. If all these activities – when pursued with intensity or gusto – can be defined as illnesses that require cure, there seems little in cultural life that can withstand the expansive power of the mental professions and pharmaceutical industry. Unless we can mount a collective refusal. 2

A critique such as this is designed to mobilize resistance. Indeed, Foucault’s own writings were focally concerned with ways of combating the expanding domains of power/knowledge, as he termed the process of cultural disciplining. Foucault urged his readers to fight against these forces through resistance, subversion, and self-transformation. Yet, while rousing the spirit of revolution, we must also realize the limits to the rebellious response to power/knowledge invasion. Consider, then, two substantial problems with the unrelenting posture of antagonism toward the dominant order.

First, there is the problem of freedom. To fight against the invasive influence of power, is to hold out a promise that we might one day become free – no one controlling or containing us with an alien knowledge. Yet, freedom from the ordering effects of language, from all traditions or conventions is not freedom: it is essentially a step into insignificance – a space where there is no freedom because there are no distinctions, and thus no choices. This is not at all to undermine the critical impulse; however, it is to place strong emphasis on visioning the alternative. We cannot step out of meaning or avoid ordering of any kind. If we wish to refuse one form of disciplining, what form of ordering do we suggest in its place? For example, there is good reason to put a lid on the expansion of psychiatric diagnosis. However, we do not therefore step into an arena of pure freedom. The invitation is to generate alternative understandings of greater promise.

Closely related is a second major problem with an unrelenting critical posture: it fails to take account of the positive effects of ordering. To reject all that Foucault might call ‘disciplining’ or ‘ordering’ would be to erase virtually all that we value. We cannot have another’s love without participating in a social ordering of some kind; parents cannot give their children love without the regime we call ‘family’; we can scarcely achieve justice without an institution of law. Required, then, is differentiating

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appraisal. Given a range of disciplinary traditions, we may launch enquiry into consequences, both negative and positive. In what ways does a tradition sustain that which we hold to be good, in what ways does it fail? How could it be otherwise? The professional practices of classifying and curing mental disease, for example, have the negative effects of inviting us to see normal problems of daily life as “illnesses”, diminishing our abilities to generate local solutions (believing these are problems for professionals), and providing us with multiple means of finding fault in others and ourselves (for example, “He is obese”, “She is anorexic”, “He is addicted to his work”). Yet, the classifications of “mental illness” do give many people the sense that they are not personally responsible for their problems (“I can’t help it, I’m ill”), and that there are professionals who can alleviate their suffering. They are not alone, nor are they hopeless. In this kind of differentiating appraisal, then, we may bring forth alternatives that retain some of the virtues of our traditions while removing those we believe harmful.

Identity Politics: To Be or Not to Be

Like any common living thing, I fear and reprove classification and the death it entails, and I will not allow its clutches to lock down on me …

Trin Minh-ha, Woman Native Other

In this chapter I have treated three major sources of our common constructions of the real and good. The discussion has centred on the structure of our language, on practices of everyday interchange, and on the institutions of authority. In many ways the discussion has emphasized the stability of our constructions. I have suggested the difficulty of escaping the structures of language, the way conversations draw us in to a common reality, and the power of institutions to sustain their authority. To be sure, I have also emphasized the importance of critical reflection and the potentials for resistance. However, in this final section I wish to balance the emphasis of the preceding sections on stability with a focus on fluidity in construction.

The process of world construction is taking place wherever people are in communication, and in every relationship there are multiple traditions coming into contact, creating new formations of expression. There are also conflicts among traditions that continuously threaten their existence. Thus, as you move from the context of the family, to a friendship group, to a classroom, to the athletic field, to a place of worship, and so on, you will continuously shift in the kinds of realities and values that are central. You will also import the realities and values central in one context into another, and this may yield creative combinations (e.g. teams engaging in prayer together before a game, families discussing at dinner a book you have read for class). There may also be conflicts, with the realities and values shared in a friendship group clashing with those of one’s parents, or one’s religious views scorned by a friendship group. Social life is thus a seesaw dynamic between forces for stability and for change.

To illustrate this dynamic in motion, let us return again to the construction of the self, and the way one’s identity becomes subject to political movements. Consider first
the way we are defined by others. In particular, much depends on the way we are represented in others’ talk – their descriptions, explanations, criticisms, or congratulations. Such talk creates our social reputation. Yet, these are not the words we would necessarily choose; they are generated by others – our friends, family, neighbours, teachers and so on. It is our identity which is at stake, but we cannot fully control the way we are represented. For example, a child who grows into an adult may return home, only to find his parents treating him like a child. A woman who joins a company may find her male colleagues treating her more like a woman than a working partner.

Now consider the issue on a societal level: all of us are identified with one or more social groups – woman, man, Christian, Jew, black, white, German, Irish, Hispanic, and so on. Such groups are often the subject of media interest – film, novels, news reports, advertising, etc. When our group is represented to millions of people we confront helplessness writ large. When women are depicted as silly and emotional, Asians as obedient, Germans as menacing, Irish as aggressive and so on, we are implicated. It is not only a matter of public reputation, but as these reputations become shared so do they come to be the taken-for-granted realities. And it is these realities that inform public policies, educational practices, police actions, and so on. There is racial profiling of blacks, suspicion of Muslims, antipathy toward Germans, and so on. Further, these same public portrayals inform those depicted. Here one may learn what it is to be a woman, Asian, heterosexual, and so on. One’s actions may begin to resemble the stereotype.

In terms of the present discussion we may say that our identities are importantly fashioned by the institutions of the media. And when the media create stereotypes of various groups, we now enter the arena of politics. Who is hurt by these practices; who is helped; how could things be different? The result of such questioning has set in motion several major movements, each of which deserves attention. The first movement is perhaps the most obvious: resistance. There were early critiques by Italian Americans for the media portrayals of them as gangsters, by African Americans for their caricature as Uncle Toms and Aunt Jemimahs, and women for their one-dimensional depiction as sex objects. Now such resistance is multiplied. Native Americans reject the ways in which they are represented in museums, as savage and primitive; gays and lesbians show how Hollywood films enkindle homophobia; seniors resist the depiction of old people as incapacitated, and so on (see, for example, Naylor, 1982; 1991).

For many of those engaged in identity politics, these forms of resistance are only a beginning. More important is the challenge of gaining the capacity for depicting themselves. A second wave of identity politics is thus invested in identity activism. In the terms of social theorist Ernesto Laclau, “The crucial question … is not who the social agents are, but the extent to which they manage to constitute themselves” (1990, p. 36). Or as black feminist Patricia Hill Collins has put the case, “The insistence on Black female self-definition reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image – namely refuting the Black matriarchy thesis – to one of stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself … the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women’s power as human subjects” (1990, pp. 106–107). Put in this light, one’s ethnic, racial or religious identity
is a site of struggle, a contest between self-control versus being controlled by others. Thus we find television networks pressed to expand their fare to include and fairly present the experiences of the under-represented groups. Oprah Winfrey, for example, has been singled out for the way in which she has transformed the public image of both women and black culture (Squire, 1994). We also find a proliferation of niche magazines by and about feminists, African Americans, the gay community, and so on; and a spate of films, plays and books revealing the lives of the marginalized in their own voices.

Yet, the movement toward identity activism is not without its problems. In the former case, if you write or make a film about “your people”, you are representing them – and effectively, they continue to be without control. Further, many within such groups object to the way they are depicted “by their kind”. For example, if an author wishes to reveal the miseries resulting from an oppressive society – emphasizing for example, suffering, drugs and violence – the identified group often feels betrayed. They appear as abnormal, incapacitated victims. On the other hand, if the author wishes to stress the richness of a tradition, the joys, the communal bonds, and so on, antagonism again erupts. Here the work is faulted for the pretty picture it paints, a picture that provokes no political action but suggests the status quo is just fine. Consider the reaction of black feminist bell hooks to the way black film-maker Spike Lee portrays blacks and women:

We must ask then, can anyone be trusted to represent any group? Must the answer be “every person for him/herself?” Wouldn’t this bring an end to the political power of group unity? At the same time, the issue of group unity has come under question. Many individuals who might otherwise be classified within a group feel resentment at the classification. All too often they are under pressure from others in their group to “be with and like us”. They are expected to “follow our traditions”, marry within the group, “vote the way we do”, and so on. Yet, not all those who can be identified with a group wish to espouse its positions. There are many Jews who are committed Christians, Pakistanis who are gay activists, African Americans engaged in Muslim causes. Such individuals may be scorned and possibly ostracized. Similarly, if they are living outside the group, others may treat them as representatives of their group. They may be expected to speak for “your people”. Their identity marker – skin colour, sexual preference, accent, or religious symbols – may come to stand for their entire identity. Others may be blind to their individuality.

Issues such as these have sparked yet another wave of identity politics, category deconstruction. Central to this wave is a growing critique of the ways in which all representations of a people, regardless of the author or content, tend to essentialize their object. To essentialize in this case is to treat a social category (for example, women, gays, Asians) as standing for an essence – a set of intrinsic qualities or characteristics residing within a
people. This is a longstanding problem in the case of race, a category commonly used as if to mirror a specific set of essences that distinguish one group from another. Yet, there is no essence – no essential nature – lurking within people of which skin colour, height, facial hair, and so on are the "manifestations". As the cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, puts it, "What is at issue here is the recognition … that ‘black’ is a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature" (Hall, 1996, p. 443). This tendency to essentialize people belonging to a group also fosters antagonism: avoidance, distrust, and hatred. For those inside a group, it suggests that "we are different, and you can neither understand nor fully participate in our community". For the outsider, every group thus becomes the Other: alien, self-seeking and ultimately antagonistic. So many and so politically active are the divisions within American society, that political theorist James Davison Hunter (1991) coins the phrase culture wars to characterize the condition.

Given these problems, how is political work to proceed? There is no single answer here; the dialogues are in motion. There are first those who feel betrayed by these critiques of essentialism. As they argue, just when women and minorities are beginning to gain a sense of autonomy and self-direction – taking charge of their own identities – the critics begin to fault their essentialism. To do this removes the grounds for social critique, and the rationale for changing society. For example, if there are no "women" (the category of "woman" is only a superficial label) how can we fight for equal rights for women?
For feminist Naomi Weisstein those who see gender and other categories as socially constructed represent “a high cult of critique”, and she has lamented, “Sometimes I think that, when the fashion passes, we will find many bodies, drowned in their own wordy words, like the Druids in the bogs” (Weisstein, 1993, p. 244).

There are more promising possibilities. For example, African American scholar Cornell West (1993) emphasizes the importance of developing within the black community a love ethic, which can enable people to work together in a context of heightened self-esteem. Such an ethic might enable better relations within the society more generally. Sociologist Tod Gitlin (1995) looks to popular movements and organizations that can cross the “identity trenches” to link otherwise disparate groups of minorities. Labour unions once served this purpose; new groups are now needed. Others believe we must radically expand the democratic process, so that people in all sectors of society can participate in dialogue. Supporting this view, others make strong arguments for civilizing our forms of public debate, finding less hostile ways of speaking together (see, for example, Kingwell, 1995; Hunker, 1994). More radical are the ideas of theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) who urges a wholesale dissolving of distinctions such as men and women, heterosexual and homosexual. Because being female, for example, is not a “natural fact” but a form of “cultural performance”, we are free to perform in new ways. In revolutionary fashion, she opts for performances that blur the common distinctions; “gender bending” and “bisexuality” are illustrative. Others argue for a more fluid or nomadic conception of self, one that is not fixed in any category but which moves with time and circumstance – taking political stands but not permanently so (see, for example, Flax, 1993; Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). Clearly, the challenge of political reconstruction remains very much with us; you as reader may well contribute to the next step.

Reflection

I have found so many of the ideas in this chapter intellectually exciting and personally useful. I have had to reconsider much in my life that I took for granted, I have changed many things about my life, and I find every day a creative challenge. It is my fond hope that as readers, some of this excitement and world-changing experience can be yours as well. But in looking over what I have written here, perhaps you feel as I do, that I have placed too much emphasis on spoken and written language. I have said almost nothing about what we might call the material context. After all, in common terms, how we engage in conversation without an environment that sustains our lives? And certainly the way we construct the world must depend on matters of health, economy, politics, world conflict, and so on. Surely we don’t go on constructing the real and the good, irrelevant of what is happening outside air verbal exchanges. And yet, as I consider this absence of the material world in these pages, I also become aware of why so little has been written about its impact on social construction. Because, once you enter the halls of social construction, there is no material world in itself. That is, what we call the material world is itself a construction. And this goes for matters of health, economy, politics, world peace, and so on. This
does not mean that we should no longer speak of these matters. Not at all. Rather, it means that when we do, we must be conscious that we are joining in the language games of our cultural traditions. My feeling is that it is the major challenge of the present book to stimulate this kind of consciousness. When fully in place, then we can talk more seriously about the significance of the material world – fully aware that this is but one way of understanding.

Notes

1 This term derives from Aristotle’s classic theories of narrative, in which he distinguishes between the comedy and the romance on the grounds of their specific content. However, because both Aristotelian types share the same narrative form they are here allied.
2 For further steps toward refusal see http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/Kgergen1/Psychodiagnostics/index.html

Further Resources

On the Narrative Construction of Reality


Metaphors in Social Construction


Construction in Conversation

The Rhetoric of the Real


Social Institutions, Power and Reality


Identity and Cultural Dynamics